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"Losing A Good Friend"

Taft, Departing Ambassador To Ireland, Forged New Links: Irish To Miss Him

By JOHN HEALY

It's the usual thing when an Ambassador leaves a country to say the nicest things about him. And in the coming weeks in Ireland there'll be a lot of people who will say the nicest things about William Howard Taft, III, the American Ambassador in Ireland who is due to return to Washington and a new post. They'll say how he "strengthened the ties of friendship" between the two countries; how his understanding and sympathy towards Ireland and Irish problems helped "forge new links." Most of all, he'll be told that in losing him, Ireland is losing a good friend and is very sorry over it.

And it'll all be true.

For William Howard Taft, III, was all of those things—and Ireland will be genuinely sorry to see him go.

I didn't know him any better than any other Dublin newsman. But every Dublin newsman knew him better than they knew any other Ambassador in Ireland's Embassy Row. Just as the people of Ireland knew him and saw more of him than they did of any other Ambassador. He first came to Ireland, as I remember it, shortly after the war as a special assistant to the chief of the ECA Mission, returning in 1948 to join CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). And when Ireland next saw him, this tall, lean man Howard Taft III, U. S. Ambassador to Ireland."

The name and the title were both very formidable. I think most newsmen, when they first

met Mr. Taft, were disappointed. It was a sub-conscious thing. You thought the American ambassador should be like America; full of that "get-up-go" spirit. You expected, for instance, that when the American Ambassador spoke, he should be heard easily and his delivery should be swift, forthright and his remarks delivered with that well-mannered drive that stopped diplomatically short of high-pressure salesmanship.

Disappointment — The First Time

I know I was disappointed the first time I interviewed him at Shannon Airport. For in addition to the sub-conscious picture I had built up, I also remembered he was the son of "Ohio's Bob Taft". And, reading about Ohio's "Bob" Taft Taft and the speeches he made — to me, they were most forthright and blunt — I had expected his son to be much the same.

He wasn't. Or so I thought. But like a lot of other people in Ireland, I found out later that that slow drawl of his and superficial answer was something much more; it was devastatingly deceptive. For in a few words, he said more than many people said in a hour's speech.

His easy-going leisurely manner gave you the impression that he was just what he should be: an ambassador who attended dinners and functions and said the routine things and did the routine chores most Ambassadors said and did. It was as late as last Summer that one Dublin newsman learned just how wrong it was to make any assumptions in the case of Mr. Taft. We were covering the Annual Summer gathering of Macra

na Feirme, the powerful farmers' organization, in Ballynasloe County Galway. The Ambassador was a guest and it was on a Saturday evening, a particularly awkward one for newsmen because of an early deadline for the Sunday papers. We realized that, if we waited until the guests had dined and the various speakers had said their pieces, we would miss the important country edition.

A Lesson Learned

So when the Ambassador arrived, it was decided to ask him if he would give us his script so we could phone it to Dublin beforehand. The newsman who agreed to ask him remarked: "Oh he'll have nothing to say anyway — he's a harmless man at a specialized group like this farmers' organization". He hustled away, was back five minutes later. "I told you — he has nothing. Give him a line about the importance of agriculture to Ireland's economy and that'll cover him", remarked the newsman, with the superior air of the "I-told-you-so" man.

An hour later, the American ambassador got to his feet and in his introductory remarks said something like this: As I came in here this evening, one member of the press corps stopped me to see if I had a script. He told me I wouldn't have much to say and I agreed that was right; he asked me if I'd be stressing the ties between our two countries and if I'd be likely to mention the importance of agriculture to the Irish economy. And after that he went away.

There was a general laugh. Even the newsman concerned thought it was a great joke. Until five minutes later. And then as he listened he found that the Ambassador was, for all his leisurely manner of speaking, giving

ing those experts a shrewd analysis of the problems facing Ireland's farmers and some sound advice on what they should do. And all of it, off the cuff and without a script.

Delayed Action

Mr. Taft has that habit — fifteen minutes after he says a

thing the penny starts to drop and you get the punch, hard and solid. He also had the habit of sounding disarming when he began an address. This often led people into expecting nothing more than diplomatic pleasantries and before you knew where you were your attention was rivetted on the flow of expert knowledge he had on his subject. That was why they called his "scholarly" — an adjective used very sparingly, but admirably in Ireland.

It was this characteristic and his pleasant, almost Irish — we call it "homely" — way as well as his genuine interest in Ireland and the Irish which made him the most travelled and most popular Ambassador in Ireland today.

I didn't know him too well — but I'm very sorry he's going. I

think that's how most Irishmen will feel about it. Because he was a man you could talk to. He was no stiff-shirted diplomat and he was no card-index man.

Ireland has its own way of measuring a man and letting him know by the way they address him, just what they think of him. And when shortly they come to say good-bye to him, the men who welcomed him to Ireland a few years ago as "His Excellency, Mr. William Howard Taft III, the American Ambassador to Ireland" will shake his hand warmly and say to him: "Good-bye, Bill." And it will have all the intimacy, respect, affection when they called him "Ohio's" and admiration that a greater country showed for another Taft Bob Taft".

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